



Advocating for teachers
and public education

**Connecticut Education
Association**

Governance

Philip Apruzzese, President
Sheila Cohen, Vice President
Cheryl Prevost, Secretary
Jeff Leake, Treasurer
Kathy Flaherty, NEA Director
Thomas Nicholas, NEA Director

Executive Office

Mary Loftus Levine
Executive Director

Government Relations

Vincent Loffredo, Director
Capitol Place, Suite 500
21 Oak Street
Hartford, CT 06106-8001
860-525-5641, 800-842-4316
Fax: 860-725-6362
www.cea.org

Affiliated with the
National Education Association

Ray Rossomando

Connecticut Education Association

*Before the
Education Committee*

Re: SB24 An Act Concerning Educational Competitiveness.

February 22, 2012

Good afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Ray Rossomando, Legislative Coordinator for the Connecticut Education Association representing 43,000 members who are active and retired teachers across the state. I am testifying today on Governor Malloy's education reform proposals.

I am here today to speak on portions of SB24 AAC Educational Competitiveness regarding ECS and other school finance issues.

ECS

We are pleased to see long-needed increases in ECS funding and the statutory foundation level, which was raised to \$12,000. We recognize that without a commitment to full-funding, ECS grant allocations should be phased-in, rather than based on arbitrary increases. However, there are certain policy changes to ECS funding that run contrary to the formula's purpose, dictated by *Horton v. Meskill* (Horton), to equalize funding for education based on each town's ability to pay.

First, the governor's ECS proposal would, for the first time, require districts to adopt specific policy proposals as a condition for receiving ECS increases. It appears to give unprecedented powers for distributing new ECS funds to the commissioner of education. The consequence of this change would be to shift significant authority from local elected boards to the State Department of Education, particularly the commissioner. More significantly, conditioning ECS increase on specific local policy decisions may create barriers to funding that run contrary to Horton.

Second, the governor's proposal makes the nonsensical leap of folding funding for charter schools into the ECS formula. Charter school funding has absolutely nothing to do with the court-driven purpose of ECS funding. Folding charter school funding into ECS is a strategy more consistent with so-called "money follows the child" proposals. Such proposals divert ECS funding away from local neighborhood schools in violation of Horton.

Furthermore, although the governor's proposals provide long-awaited increases in state funding for local schools, they unfortunately give with one hand, while taking with the other. The proposals do this by incorporating another "money follows the child" proposal that would require towns to send local tax dollars to schools outside of its own school district – namely charter schools. The net impact of this provision is to divert \$6.5 million of local tax dollars from local school districts. The impact of this provision is significant:

For example, Bridgeport, which currently receives about \$7,800 in ECS per student from the state, would now be required by the state to send \$1,000 of its local tax dollars outside of the district. The same would be true for New Haven, which receives about \$8,000 from the state in per pupil ECS funding.

For districts like Bridgeport and New Haven, which are each underfunded by over \$20 million each, the governor's proposal would redirect more than \$1.6 million to schools outside of their districts.

CEA supports funding proposals that lift all boats (including charter, magnet, and local neighborhood schools) equitably. However, such "money follows the child" proposals that redirect local tax-dollars outside of the district risk doing irreversible harm to students in classrooms already starved for adequate resources. And, they simply run contrary to the state's obligation to equalize education funding based on each town's ability to pay.

Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR)

Historically, the MBR – and its predecessor, the Minimum Expenditure Requirement or MER – have been put in place to condition receipt of ECS funds on municipalities doing their part to fund local schools. Traditionally, and with few exceptions, the MBR and MER required increases in ECS to be wholly allocated to local schools. The goal has been to set a floor on local effort and to prevent municipal bodies from using state education cost sharing funds to supplant municipal spending or be diverted to property tax relief.

However, with ECS allocations having been frozen since 2009, the MBR was amended to require districts (with limited exceptions) to budget only at least as much for their public schools as was budgeted the prior year. This freezing of the MBR has been an exception, and not the norm.

Under the governor's proposal, every district would receive an increase in ECS funding. As has historically been the case, the related MBR should require municipalities to allocate ECS fund increases to their local schools. The governor's proposal does not correct the MBR for this.

We urge legislators to fix the MBR so that it raises the minimum required local budgeting in parallel with each town's ECS increase. This would protect against funds being redirected to other, non-school related purposes. More importantly, it is a protection that is consistent with the goals of Horton.

Funding for School Choice Programs

CEA supports increases to schools of choice so long as the increases are in proportion to increases for all other school districts and do not divert funds from other public schools. As noted above, the governor's proposed changes to charter school funding do not meet this test. We urge committee members to support increases to schools of choice that are fair and avoid creating winners at the expense of children in other public schools.

To this end, CEA has been advocating for a more coherent system of funding for schools of choice. We understand that the governor's ECS Task Force will continue its work over the coming year and address the funding systems for magnet, charter, vocational-technical, agricultural-science, and other schools of choice. We urge lawmakers to let the task force complete its work before making any significant changes to choice funding systems.

It is also important that legislators reject proposals to fold funding for choice schools into the ECS formula. Such a change would contaminate the court-directed purpose of ECS. Also, as much as ECS is driven by the Horton court decision, school choice programs in Connecticut are not. The applicable court decision regarding choice schools, particularly magnet schools, is *Sheff v. O'Neill*, which addresses the goal of reducing racial isolation. Under the *Sheff* decision, the state is obligated to provide a substantially equal educational opportunity. CEA urges lawmakers to consider these distinctions when determining the most appropriate mechanisms for funding various schools models and when determining the appropriate fiscal commitment.

Small District Penalty

The governor's proposal appears to penalize small districts with per pupil expenditures that exceed 10% of the state average per pupil expenditure. The bill appears to do this presumably to encourage consolidation. We support efficiencies that keep class sizes low and result in more resources for direct classroom instruction. We are concerned that monetary penalties could unduly constrain needed resources. We urge the legislature to consider less punitive ways to encourage consolidation and efficiencies.

Conditional Districts

The governor's proposal would establish "conditional districts," which are essentially determined based on standardized test scores. As noted above, we are deeply concerned with conditioning ECS funding on specific local policies, regardless of whether we support such policies or not. It is a precedent Connecticut is best served by not setting.

CEA would support grant funding, outside of ECS, that would encourage districts to implement many of the strategies required of conditional districts. These include ensuring reading mastery, providing "wrap-around" social services, enhancing parental engagement, strengthening professional development, training evaluators, and otherwise supporting innovative approaches to improve learning.

Thank you